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journal or publication title	Notre Dame Seishin University kiyo. Studies in foreign languages and literature, Studies in culture Notre Dame Seishin University kiyo. Studies in Japanese language and literature
volume	40
number	1
page range	14-24
year	2016
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1560/00000022/

紀要 Vol. 40 No. 1（通巻第 51 号）14 ～ 24（2016）

Howard Jacobson's *J* : A Dystopian View of the Future?

Yoshiji Hirose ※

ハワード・ジェイコブソン著「J」：反ユートピア的未来？

広瀬　佳司

ハワード・ジェイコブソンは2010年に出版した *The Finkler Question* で一躍有名になり、「マン・ブッカー」賞を受賞したユダヤ系イギリス作家である。ジェイコブソンは、奇抜な発想で様々なテーマを扱うが、どこかに必ずユダヤ伝統を感じさせる描写が織り込まれている。ユダヤ系アメリカ作家で言えば、フィリップ・ロスに類似していて、機知とユーモアに溢れた作家なのだ。ジェイコブソンが 2014 年に出版したのが今回取り上げる長編小説 *J* である。この世界をジストピア的に見ている、という評論の論調が主であるが、よく見ればそうとも言えない作品構造になっている。本論では、ジストピア的な側面ではなくユートピア的な部分に焦点を当てたい。

キーワード：ジストピア，ユートピア

I. Can love change past trauma?

In most of his works, Howard Jacobson deals with Jewish subjects focusing on intriguing and puzzling questions, such as anti-Semitism (*Roots Schmoots Journey Among Jews*, 1994, *The Finkler Question*, 2010), and a murder case in a Hasidic community (*Kalooki Nights*, 2006). This esoteric novel *J* (2014), like *The Act of Love* (2008), does not directly refer to Jewish issues and it does not even suggest any Jewish references except for the names of main characters, like Kevern Cohen, Rebecca Lestchinsky and Ailinn Solomons. The title of the book *J* stems from the protagonist's father's pronunciation, "This he always did to stifle the letter j before it left his lips" (6). "*J*" might symbolize "Jews" or "Judaism," or even "Jerusalem," but there is no further explanation about the title of this dystopian[1] novel.

Key Words: Dystopia, Utopia
※　本学文学部英語英文学科

John Burside argues that this novel suggests another catastrophe:

> "*J* is set in a future world still trying to recover from a historical catastrophe that it only half acknowledges and does not officially remember (this outbreak of mass violence, presumably a second Holocaust, is shrouded in obfuscation and is always referred to as "what happened, if it happened"). But that world is only a step away from our own.[2]

Kevern Cohen reads non-romantic books, and he also plays his father's Fats Waller records in a semi-remote cottage near Port Reuben, a seaside town where, increasingly, the populace has become more and more violent. Therefore, most of critics maintain that this is a dystopian novel.[3] Cohen's neighbours find his solitary, fastidious way of life puzzling. They do not think he is simple-minded. If anything, they think him a little too clever. But there are times in the history of humanity when cleverness might as well be simplicity. When he falls in love with Ailinn Solomons, he does so reluctantly, and soon his world is opened up to increasing scrutiny.

Ailinn Solomons, twenty-five years old, knows nothing about her parents as she was an abandoned child. Her adoptive parents picked her out of an orphanage "like an orange" (5). Later in the book, we are informed that her grandmother Rebecca Macshuibhne, the wife of pastor Fridleif, was originally from the Lestchinsky family, but after her marriage converted to Christianity, cutting relations with her own lineage. Just after her first daughter Coira is baptized, Rebecca becomes more concerned about her parents when they do not respond to her letter informing them about her newly-born Coira, because they usually reply promptly to her letters.

Against her husband's protests, Rebecca leaves her house with the baby to visit her parents.

> She had made great sacrifices for Fridleif. She had broken the hearts of her mother and father who in her own heart she did not expect ever to see again. She had given him everything else; she would not give him her child. (277)

On the way, however, she realizes it impossible to take her baby daughter with her and gives her up at St. Brigid's church. There is no further reference to the baby, but Coira may have become the mother of Ailinn, and she gives up raising up Ailinn as well.

Ailinn's partner Kevern Cohen shares a similar entangled family background. He detests his 'cursed blood' as the result of his parents' sinful marriage: his mother and father were "first cousins" (52). Therefore, Kevern tries to maintain an isolated life in order not to have children with 'cursed blood.'

> He wondered if it explained the oddity of his nature. Was that the reason he had never married and had children of his own? Was he possessed of some genetic knowledge that would ensure his contaminated line would die out? . . . What he couldn't forgive them for was not taking their secret to the grave. Why had they left incriminating documents behind? Shouldn't they have kept him in the dark about what they'd done, as they'd kept him in the dark about almost everything else in their past—where they'd come from, what sort of family theirs was, who they *were*? (52-3)

Controlling his natural desire to get married and produce offspring, he believes that his destiny has been decided by his parents' unusual marriage.

But their similar family histories bring Kevern and Ailinn closer together. For Kevern, his parents' marriage is "a monstrosity" (54), and the idea of being a father is beyond his imagination. Knowing his secret, Ailinn attempts to save him from its pressure. "She loved him and wanted to relieve him of some of the stress he was obviously under" (61). In fact, her love for him slowly softens his harsh judgment of his parents' sin. Through his relations with Ailinn, a woman as warm and compassionate as the sun, his hurt feelings are gradually healed. In his heart, he is easily captured by the feelings of "disgust" (66) concerning his parents' matrimony. It is obvious that his feelings change as a result of Ailinn's affection toward him and his sense of revulsion toward his parents has been eased to some extent:

> Kevern wondered whether what had disgusted his grandmother—and in all likelihood disgusted every member of the family—was the incestuous union her child had made. (66)

The change brought by Ailinn can be regarded as a good sign of his mental healing through love. His slow change is still not enough to accept an ordinary marriage, as we see in his decision, "I am content to be the end of my line" (98).

II. Cohen and Cohentown—In Search of His Roots

The less Kevern is informed about his family history, the more he is curious about his roots. For some reason, his father told him once, "Don't go to Cohentown, it will disappoint you" (155). Not only his father but also his mother did not like to be asked where they had come from. Kevern believes that "it reminded them of their sin in marrying" (155).

While traveling with Ailinn, Kevern happens to visit Cohentown which might be his parents' home town. He philosophically reflects upon the meaning of culture.

> If his family had been here he would surely know it in whatever part of

> himself such things are known—at his fingertips, on his tongue, in his throat, in the throbbing of his temples. Ghosts? Of course there were ghosts. What was culture but ghosts? What was memory? What was self? But he knew the danger of indulging this. Yes, he could persuade himself that the tang of happy days, alternating with frightful events, came back to him—kisses and losses, embraces and altercations, love, heartbreak, shouting, incest . . . Whatever his father and mother had concealed from him, whatever they warned him would dismay and disappoint him were he to recover any trace of it. (156)

His strong nostalgia for his family connections is expressed here. Kevern has been isolated from his family history because of his parents' incestuous union. In his understanding, culture seems to be ghosts, entities of memory and self. In other words, the name of Cohentown becomes a symbol of Kevern's identity, and it eventually becomes a Jewish identity. Jacobson never illuminates any signs of Jewishness throughout this novel, unlike in his other works, but the name of "Cohentown" indicates the origin of his name.

Every main character of this novel is traumatized by their family history or their past. Though Jacobson does not provide any stories of the Holocaust, we feel the perspective of Holocaust survivors wandering in their shtetls demolished during World War II. In one epigraph, there is one enigmatic reference possibly to the Holocaust.

> They arrived to music, labored to music, trooped to the crematoria to music. "Bruder! Zur Sonne, zur Freiheit," they were made to sing. "Bruders! Zum Lichte empor"—"Brothers! To the light." Followed, maybe, by the Blue Danube in all its loveliness, or a song from *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, not that any of them cared where he was from. Music that ennobles the spirit revealing its ultimate sardonic nature, its knowledge of its own untruth, because ultimately there is no ennobled nature. What was the logic? To pacify or to jeer? Why ice-cream vans, the arrival of which, playing the "Marseillaise" or "Fur Elise" or "Whistle While You Work," excited the eager anticipation of the children? To pacify or to jeer? Or both? Between themselves, the parents cannot agree on the function or the message. The vans, for now, are better than the trains, some say. Shame there isn't actually any ice for the children, but be grateful and sing along. Others believe the vans are just the start of it. We have heard the chimes at midnight, they believe. (214)

Throughout the novel this is the only allusion to the Holocaust, and Jacobson never directly evokes Jewishness or Judaism. As a result, his writing elevates the sense of unknowing fear. The description of on of concentration camps quoted above resounds while Kevern roams around Cohentown. He enigmatically says: "They have

the air of living lives on someone else's grave" (157). Ailinn understands what he hints at and she reproves him for his hasty judgment. In response to her words, he says "I'm just trying to describe what I feel" (157). He cannot explain what it is, but he feels, "It's as though the place is not possessed by its inhabitants" (157). Now, this Cohentown is inhabited by non-Jews, but Kevern feels that it must have been a Jewish town, like many vanished shtetls in the East European countries. "Ghosts" seem to be hovering over him, and Kevern actually hears his dead mother's voice when he is just about to leave Cohentown.

> He had heard his mother's voice. "Kevern," she called. Just that. "Key-vern"[4] —coming from a long way away, not in pain or terror, but as though through a pane of glass. Then he thought he heard the glass shatter. Could she have broken it with her voice?
>
> It made no sense that she should be calling him. She hadn't been a Cohen except by marriage to his father, unless . . . but he wasn't thinking along those lines today, so why should he hear her calling to him in Cohentown?
>
> Calling him in, or warning him to turn away? Away, he thought. He could even feel her hands on his chest. Go! Leave it, your father is right, it will dismay and disappoint you. (158)

In any case, Cohentown is a very symbolic place for Kevern, and enigmatic for us readers. We are not given any information about where Kevern's parents are from and there is no reference to their relation with Cohentown. However, judging from this spooky scene of his imagining his deceased mother's voice, this town can be understood as a place connected to them.

Judaism holds that ghosts do exist but should not be consulted. The Hebrew word for ghost is *shed or ruekh*, but a more profound and interesting Hebrew/Yiddish word for ghost is *dybbuk*. A *dybbuk* is a wandering soul that can possess or attach to a living person in an attempt either to live vicariously through the person or to control their body and actions to do their will. The word means "to cling" or "cleave," and amazingly, is not always viewed as a bad thing to have. Some within Judaism believe that not only can ghosts cling to another human being, but also, spirit guides who assist people on earth will also attach to people.

According to the definition by Leo Rosten in his *The New Joys of Yiddish* (2001), a *dybbuk* is "an evil spirit—usually the soul of a dead person that enters a living person on whom the dead one had some claim" (Rosten 91).

Jacobson often uses rich and colorful Yiddish expressions, and in fact, he introduces the notion of *shlemiel* (fool) into this novel. Therefore, it is not surprising for us to discover a *dybbuk* through Kevern's deceased mother, as if Cohentown is haunted by the Jews who originally inhabited it. He makes use of "a dybbuk" in order to evoke

long vanished Jewish traditions in Eastern Europe and Russia during World War II.

III. Esme Nussbaum

Esme Nussbaum is another of the main characters, and she plays an important role in uniting Kevern with Ailinn.

> Esme Nussbaum [is] an intelligent and enthusiastic thirty-two-year-old researcher employed by Ofnow, the non-statutory monitor of the Public Mood, prepared a short paper on the continuance of low-and medium-level violence in those very areas of the country where its reduction, if not its cessation, was most to have been expected, given the money and energy expected, given the money and energy expended on uprooting it. (16)

Though Esme is in the position of monitoring confidential information about troubled people, she is also harassed by her mother's past misbehavior. Rhoda Nussbaum, Esme's mother, had an affair with her schoolteacher at the age of sixteen.

> He was married, her teacher, older than her parents, undressing her, describing the shape of her breasts with his fingers, his touch so intrusively naked he might have been describing them in four-letter words. They were offending against every decency she had been taught. (250)

The schoolteacher confesses that he accidentally killed a child when he was young. Hearing his confession, true or false, Rhoda loses her interest in studying and leaves school before she achieved what had been expected of her.

Thus, every main character has some dark family history and are harassed or obsessed by their own history. Rhoda did not have a chance to reveal her secrets to anybody and died without having "got to meet a man she liked" (266).

Esme calls her inquisitiveness "Fossil-hunting" (266). She debriefs agents on a regular basis for "anyone behaving strangely, out of character with the community, anyone local people thought suspicious, of dubious provenance" (267). Like George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, who is betrayed by his friend in his youth and moves into a village where nobody knows him, keeping aloof from the local people as much as possible, Kevern is dubious enough to intrigue her.

While engaging in her research on misfits, Esme wonders if it is an essential condition of everyone to be alien to someone else.

> Sociologically, it was interesting to discover how many misfits even the smallest hamlets yielded. How many runaway wives or husbands, how many defectors of one sort or the other—from responsibility, from debt, from the law, from careers,

> from gender—how many were judged, rightly or wrongly, to be foreigners, illegal immigrants, gypsies, visitors from another solar system even. Was there anyone, she sometimes wondered, who wasn't alien to someone else? (267-8)

This is her insightful estimation about human nature, which can be understood, not only by others, but also by the people themselves. Based on our own insight, we judge others rightly or wrongly, and we try to distinguish insiders from outsiders.

Judging from Jacobson's symbolic title of this novel *J*, Esme's perception corresponds to anti-Semitism among Christians in Eastern-European countries, in particular, during World War II. It also reflects anti-Semitism in Britain. Jacobson cleverly handles time throughout this novel, and as a result readers are often confused by the sense of time. The author intentionally jumps from one time to another. By dealing with double or triple time schemes, the writer tries to evoke the sense of complication and depth of human relations. He is also taking aim at criticizing racial discrimination in Britain and other European countries.

In this respect, Esme is an important character manipulating the two protagonists, Kevern and Ailinn. She introduces them to each other, and they fall in love with each other with her assistance, without knowing her intention. To her, the two of them are very intriguing subjects for her sociological research.

In fact, Esme herself is a fascinating specimen for her research, too. The marriage of her parents had been a "horror to them both" (243). She describes her parents harshly:

> She suddenly saw them as a pair of evil planets, barren of life, spinning through space, in constant relation to each other but never colliding. Did a marriage obey the same unvarying law of physics as the solar system? And society too? Was this equipoise of antagonism essential? (243)

As a result of her parents' bad example, she seems to have given up on marriage for herself, and we are not sure if Esme is a lesbian or not. It is easy for us to imagine that her mother Rhoda's affair with her school teacher may have something to do with her mother's unhappy marriage. In any case, Esme's pessimistic view of marriage well reflects her parents' terrible and desolate relationship. Therefore, she even generalizes all society as an "equipoise of antagonism." Rhoda is aware of the affinity with her daughter's philosophy, "Planets, marriages, collisions, commotion—she heard all that. Some of her daughter's thoughts and phrases she even recognized as her own" (246).

Esme's father Compton Nussbaum is cruel to his daughter, even when she is knocked down by a motorcyclist riding the pavement and lies in a coma for two months.

> What Compton Nussbaum believed was that what happened for the best of reasons, there was no effect that didn't have a cause, what people suffered they had brought upon themselves. (240)

Depending only upon his own headstrong philosophy, Compton never feels compassion for others, including his own daughter. Without hesitation he can say to his wife, "I feel satisfied when I see justice done" (240). Thus, he seems satisfied when he sees his own daughter lying in a coma as a result of traffic accident, as if it was a reasonable punishment given to his 'lesbian daughter.'

On the contrary, Rhoda shows her daughter much concern and compassion wishing her an early recovery from the coma. After this hospital scene, the time suddenly goes back to the past, when young Rhoda had a brief affair with her schoolteacher, as if Jacobson tries to reveal the depth of Esme's life through her mother.

IV. Messiah for Kevern

Kevern's aloofness from society has been formed by his parents' teaching:

> His parents had taught him well in one regard. Remain a stranger to the place, they had said. Say nothing. Ask for nothing. Explain yourself to no one. But they had also cautioned him to go unnoticed, and in that he could scarcely have fared worse. Everyone knew who he was—Kevern "Coco" Cohen, the man with the sour expression who sat on his own bench above the blowhole, saying nothing, asking for nothing, explaining himself to no one. (334)

Following his parents' education at home, Kevern keeps to his isolated life in a village. As mentioned, this is a modern version of George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, a novel about the life of a lonely weaver, eventually saved by a small child Eppie. Kevern is saved by Esme who wishes for Ailinn and Kevern a new life freed from their gloomy past. "Esme told (Ailinn) that she wanted Ailinn and Kevern to renew the future of their people" (301).

Kevern's way of thinking is marked by his fatalistic philosophy as we see in the following argument with Ailinn:

> "Why did you speak of pride and honor? Where's the honor, please tell me? You might as well ask this ant which I am about to tread on to view all previous years of his life with pride."
>
> "It's not to his shame that you stamp on him."
>
> "We have to take responsibility for our fate. Even an ant. What happens to him is his disgrace." (317)

We can see some resemblance between Kevern's gloomy and fatalistic thoughts and Esme's father's cause and effect theory. Both Kevern and Compton are bound by their fatalism. This may be one reason why Esme strongly wishes Kevern's release from his past.

Esme's dream comes true. In his love-confession to Ailinn, we can see a good sign of Kevern's change, a liberation from his self-punishing, isolated life.

> "Should anything happen to you I will fall immediately into the deepest sleep known to man. I might never wake up from it. I'd hope never to wake up from it. That's how impossible I would find life without you." (271)

This can be understood as a supreme expression of his love for Ailinn, which he has never felt for anyone before. There is no doubt that Ailinn is a saviour for Kevern with her unfortunate childhood in an orphanage.

Accidentally or deliberately, Ailinn becomes pregnant, and Kevern is shocked by the fact. As we have seen, he does not wish to have a child on account of his parents' "incestuous union." Knowing Kevern's negative reaction, Ailinn cannot tell him about it when she becomes aware of her pregnancy. Kevern gets angry because other villagers are informed about it before him.

> "And you didn't discuss it with me why . . . ?"
> She said nothing.
> "Given your hope for me eventually," he persisted, "why didn't you at least try me initially?"
> There was no way back from this. "I couldn't risk it."
> "Couldn't risk my saying no?"
> "Exactly." (338)

Ailinn is afraid of his categorical denial, "The risk was that you would express your refusal so vehemently that there would be no going back from it" (339). After she becomes pregnant, she changes her attitude toward their future. To Kevern it is not his chosen future, which was to die out without leaving a trace behind. Kevern is afraid that his future will be determined by the coming baby. "It isn't just a future for you and me, is it? It's the future" (339). His negative reaction to "the future" must be a result of his past determined by his parents' disgraceful marriage,

Ailinn, on the other hand, fixes her mind to have the baby, and tells Kevern, "I'm simply saying you could stay out of whatever you want to stay out of" (340). He firmly clings to his own deterministic philosophy:

> What happened didn't always happen because you wanted it to, but what you

> made of it was your responsibility. Help there was little and gods there were none. We are the authors of our own consequences, if not always of our own actions. (342)

As mentioned, his world view is deeply colored by fatalism, which has some affinity with Esme's father's unsympathetic perception of life. This also expresses Kevern's non-religious position; in other words, he tries to take responsibility for his own behavior by saying, "We are the authors of our own consequences, if not always of our own actions." He suggests his parents' marriage by "not always of our own actions," and he also shows his decision to take responsibility for his parents' deeds and also for his future baby. This strong sense of consequences narrows his choices for their new life, and he consequently isolates himself from the local society till he encounters Ailinn. He is a very serious man, though he is regarded as a misfit and outsider in the village.

Looking at Kevern in agony, Ailinn says to Esme, "This is not a good way to start, with anger between us" (342). In contrast to her sad comments, Esme encourages Ailinn, "On the contrary, this is the best possible way to start" (342). Esme must be certain that Kevern's philosophy should be expounded to take responsibility for the new life as the "author" of his future.

Like other critics, Anthony Cummins argues that *J* is a Holocaust story of sorts — "of sorts" because it is set in a dystopian future, this novel is a Holocaust story in one dimension. However symbolic the novel is, it is also based on the realistic miserable pasts of the protagonists and their suffering. Ron Charles argues that there will be some possibility for two protagonists to be guided into happiness through love.

> In the opening pages, a stranger introduces Kevern to a young woman named Ailinn Solomons, who makes paper flowers. Although Kevern "lacked the trick of intimacy" and Ailinn "smelled of fish," they stumble into a fragile romance. We watch these two lonely people struggle to set aside their suspicions — of each other, of the world, of happiness — and fall in love.[5]

It hints at the possibility of overcoming a dystopian future through human compassion and love as seen in Kevern and Ailinn. Ailinn's pregnancy and her future baby can be interpreted as the power of humanity to challenge the dystopian future, like Eppie in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. Reflecting upon his past, Silas confesses his true feelings when little Eppie toddles into his solitary cabin:

> Since the time the child was sent to me and I've come to love her as myself, I've had light enough to trusten by; and now she says she'll never leave me, I think I shall trusten till I die." (George Eliot 300)

Eliot quotes from Wordsworth for the epigraph of Silas Marner, "A child, more than all other gifts. That earth can offer to declining man, Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts." (George Eliot 2)

Notes

[1] According to *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, dystopia is defined as, "an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible. Opp. Utopia.

[2] John Burnside, "*J* by Howard Jacobson". The guardian.com/books/2014/aug/21/j-howard-jacobson-review-british-dystopian-novel-time.

[3] Matthew Spector, "'*J*,' by Howard Jacobson". Ntimes.com/2014/12/4/books/review/j-by-howard-jacobson.

[4] Keyver-kvorim here also may refer to graves in Yiddish.

[5] Ron Charles, "*J*,' by Howard Jacobson, is a chilling tale of our anti-Semitic future," washingtonpost.com/book-review-j-by-howard-jacobson

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